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## Students' perceptions of written teacher comments: What do they say about how we respond to them?

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### The scene

*A large, suburban, public high school. Two students walk out of their Honors English class together talking about a paper that had just been returned to them. Tim, looking puzzled, speaks first.*

*Tim: "Angie, how did you do on your essay?"*

*Angie. "I did pretty well; I got a B+, how 'bout you? "*

*Tim: "Well, she gave me a C, but I don't understand why. I don't get some of these comments she gave me. I mean, how am I supposed to know what to fix when all she writes is "awkward" or underlines a sentence without explaining what's wrong with it?"*

*Angie: "I don't know. I noticed I have a few comments like those too. She wrote 'fix this' with an arrow pointing to a line I wrote, but I've got no clue what to make of it. I know I did well on the paper, but I want to know how I can improve for the next one, you know?"*

*Tim: "Yeah. What's weird is that even some of the comments that are positive, at least I guess they are, I'm not sure what exactly was good about my writing. See (he shows her a comment 'good job!' next to a paragraph, with no explanation of what was good). I know she likes my paragraph here, but I don't know what about it was good."*

We teachers believe the written responses we put on our students' papers are as clear, concise, and focused as they can be. Most of us assume that students understand what we write on their papers, and if the students choose to use them for future writing, then the comments will assist with successive drafts. However, how many of us have asked our students what they think about the ways that we respond to their writing? Or how many of us have even thought about the role that our comments play in our students' writing? Scenarios like Tim and Angie's above are not uncommon. Students do understand the majority of the comments we write on their papers, but often they have a difficult time seeing the responses' importance for revision. Too often, because of our

assumption that students understand all that we write on their papers, we don't stop to explain or elaborate certain responses that they believe to be vague or ambiguous. For us, then, it is crucial that our students understand clearly our commenting styles and the types of comments that we typically employ when marking papers. By beginning to come to an understanding about how we respond to our students' texts, they will not be put in situations similar to Tim and Angie's. This article will examine high school students' perceptions of the written teacher comments they received on one set of classroom papers. The first section of the article will look at what existing research tells us about responding to students' writing.

### **What is the research telling us?**

What comments do writers prefer to see on their papers? What comments do writers prefer not to see on their writing? Many researchers and writers have attempted to answer these two questions. Atwell (1987) explains that she believes, based on her own experiences as a teacher and writer, writers want "response that is courteous and gentle, that gives help without threatening the writer's dignity. . . . A writer wants response that takes the writer seriously and moves him or her forward"(p.66). Clearly, Atwell understands the effect written comments can have on students; we must never take students' writing lightly or fail to consider their feelings when commenting.

Straub's (1997) research supports this assertion. He found that students "were least receptive to comments that they saw as more critical than helpful"(p. 110). Further, the study found that comments written as questions were not as helpful when they "were framed in harsh or critical ways or that implied some criticism of their (the students') writing"(p. 111).

Responding to students' writing is difficult because part of our role in looking at their work is to make some judgments or criticisms about it. Straub's study points out the importance of our tone and attitude when responding to students' writing. We need to use response methods that, while leading the student toward learning, do not give them reason to feel

negative about the response process and their own writing. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) reiterate this point when they write that "comments should not overwhelm the students with a sense of failure. . . but should offer positive support"(p.394).

Nancy Sommers (1982) believes that teachers' primary goal for responding to students' writing is to help lead them to revision. She writes, "comments create the motive for doing something different in the next draft; thoughtful comments create the motive for revising"(p. 149). Sommers found that too often teachers respond in ways that do not help the writers. Comments that are vague, nonspecific, or are simply commands with little purpose don't assist students when it's time for revision. For instance, she writes, "There seems to be among teachers an accepted, albeit unwritten canon for commenting on student texts. This uniform code of commands, requests, and pleadings demonstrates that the teacher holds a license for vagueness while the student is commanded to be specific"(p.153). Comments such as "elaborate", "be specific", and "be precise" are examples. On the surface these comments look like well focused responses, however, they fail to give the writer an explanation about what needs to be elaborated on, what part of the text is not specific, and where the writing is imprecise. There is no explanation given. This may seem overly cautious on the part of the responder, but as we will see later students resoundingly support using comments that are rich with detail and example.

Lynch and Klemans (1978) asked basic writing students what kinds of comments they found most and least useful. The students felt that the most useful comments are those that "explained why things were wrong"(p. 169). Furthermore, they dislike comments that tell them they have done something wrong but do not explain how to correct it. Straub's (1997) study supports Lynch and Klemans' results. He found that "Far and away, these students most preferred—and enthusiastically expressed their appreciation for—comments that were specific and elaborate"(p. 102). With these kinds of

results, it should be clear to us that students need to see explicit, well-explained comments whose purpose is more than just calling attention to a mistake—it is to instruct. Chew (1985) sees this point, “We no longer should stress penalty for the student who errs; rather we need to find ways to make errors steps in development”(p.172). Essentially, as responders to our students’ writing we need to make each comment an instructional tool for the students to use as they revise.

For instance, several studies (Dragga, 1986; Daiker, 1983; Harris, 1977) have shown that teachers routinely do not praise students’ writing often enough. Daiker (1986) found that the vast majority of the comments (89.4%) “cited error or found fault; only . . . 10.6% of them were comments of praise”(p. 104). These results have been typical of the other studies done concerning praising students’ writing.

The importance of praising our students’ writing is emphasized by Paul B. Diederich, a senior research associate at the Educational Testing Service: “noticing and praising whatever a student does well improves writing more than any kind or amount of correction of what he does badly”(cited in Daiker, 1986, p. 105). Here Diederich is touching on the idea that students learn more and pay more attention to those comments that praise their work or make them feel better about what they have done. Murray (1982) believes it’s important to give students praise, but it must be earned. He writes: “Give your students earned praise, not patronizing pats on the head, but deserving portions of praise. Give them your respect for both what they have done and what they may do because of it”(p. 154). This statement is crucial for our understanding of our students’ writing. While it is important for us to praise our students’ writing when they deserve it, it is also just as important to remember that our writers can often tell when our comments are just there for effect. We need to look for the good in our students’ essays, but not be so positive that they won’t believe us when we praise them.

Just as it’s important for us to praise our student

writers, it is also important for us to pay attention to other ways that we respond to them. For instance, when marking students’ drafts, do we focus more on the content of the essays or on their form? Researchers agree on this subject. Sommers (1982) believes “we need to respond as any reader would, registering questions, reflecting befuddlement, and noting places where we are puzzled about the meaning of the text. Comments should point to breaks in logic, disruptions in meaning, or missing information”(p.155). Sommers’ references to “meaning,” “breaks in logic,” and “missing information” clearly support the idea of focusing on content over form. Further, she contends that we need to be certain our students do not assume one draft of an essay is “complete and coherent”(p. 154). Our comments need to show students the importance and necessity of revision by “forcing students back into the chaos, back to the point where they are shaping and restructuring their meaning”(p. 154). While drafting, students’ focus shouldn’t be on spelling, grammar, punctuation, or capitalization—those parts of the writing can come later. Making meaning and finding a purpose for the piece of writing is more important.

Dohrer’s (1991) research revealed that students do pay attention to the comments that they receive. He found that if students see that a majority of the comments on their writing are concerned with editing or grammar mistakes, then they will focus most of their attention on those problems. He also learned that because the teachers in the study spent an inordinate amount of time fixing grammar mistakes, they spent less time looking at the larger, content-oriented problems. Because of this,

Students usually ignored or minimized teachers’ requests for macrostructural changes, maybe deciding these requests were unimportant because of their small numbers or possibly deciding that the impact these changes might have on the papers was not worth the time, effort, and thought necessary to make them. (p.53)

Students realized that correcting surface-level

Word	Definition
Word comments	These comments are simply written words with no symbols connecting them to students' writing. Examples include "fragment", "good explanation," or "Can you give some examples?"
Symbol comments	These comments are marks or symbols that teachers use to show students an error or call their attention to a particular part of their essay. Some examples are circling a piece of text or underlining a part of a sentence or paragraph. It is important to remember that in this category there are no words to explain what the symbols mean.
Combination comments	These comments contain symbols as well as words. Typically, the symbols point out something for the students, and the words give some explanation, correction, or answer for them. An example for this category would be a teacher circling a word and in the margin writing "misspelled" in reference to the circled word.

**Table 1. Categories of teacher's comments**

errors was much simpler than changing the entire focus of an essay or reworking an entire section, so in many cases they opted for the easy way out. Some of these students' decisions were greatly influenced by the ways their teachers commented on their writing. Students will revise according to the cues that they get from our comments—that is why it is so important for us to comment according to the macrostructural, or content oriented, needs of our students first, and then later, move to the microstructural, or form oriented.

**Methodology**

This study was conducted at a suburban, public high school in the midwest. It focused on a sophomore Honors English class, and twelve students agreed to participate in the study. The teacher of the class was an eight-year veteran at the high school. First, the teacher marked one set of classroom essays as he normally would, and upon completing this, gave the papers to me, and I numbered each of the comments on the papers and made copies of them. After copying them, I returned the essays to the teacher along with a set of questionnaires to be distributed, two apiece, to each student. Each question on the questionnaire has two parts and pertains to each comment made on the students' papers. The first part of the

questionnaire asks "What does the comment mean?" and the second part asks "Is it helpful for future drafts of this or other papers? Why or why not"? Once the students received their papers, they filled out a questionnaire for their own essay as well as for a partner's, taking time to fill out each part of each question.

I divided the teacher's comments into three basic types: symbols, words, and a combination of the two (**Table 1** contains definitions and examples of each type).

Next, I tallied the total number and percentage of each basic comment. Then, I categorized the comments by their function. The comments had one of six functions: to *praise*, to *instruct*, to *direct*, to *question*, to *call attention to*, or to *answer* (**Table 2** contains definitions and examples of each type).

Upon analyzing the students' responses on the questionnaires and the comments the teacher wrote on the papers, I scheduled individual interviews with 5 students. After transcribing and analyzing the individual interviews with the students, I conducted a focus group interview with 4 different students from the class in order to seek clarification of initial findings. Upon transcription and analysis of this interview, some patterns in the students'



Function	Definition
Praise	Typically, these comments let students know that they did a good job. For example, “nice transition,” or “good paragraph development.”
Question	These comments simply ask writers a question about their paper. For instance, comments like “are you sure?” or “can you elaborate a bit more?”
Answer	These comments are pointed out by the teacher using symbols and then writing in a correction near the symbol as an explanation. For instance, the teacher may see a misspelled word and circle it, writing the correct spelling above it. Another example is when teachers correct students grammar mistakes.
Instruction	These comments tell the students what they are doing wrong or attempt to inform them how to improve on something without giving them the answer. For instance, comments like “please explain this in more detail,” or “point of view shift” are examples.
Direction	Though they are very similar to instruction comments, direction responses differ in one primary way—their tone. A direction comment is essentially an order to do something such as “revise this” or “rephrase.”
Attention	Most often these comments are just symbols whose main purpose is to call the students’ attention to a mistake, problem, or improvement in their writing. For example, if a teacher circles a word but gives no indication or direction as to what the symbol means. The teacher assumes that the students understand the meaning of the circle.

**Table 2. Functions of teachers’ comments**

responses became more clear. The next section of the article will examine the results of the study based on the responses on the questionnaires, individual interviews and the focus group interview.

### Results and Discussion

#### *What are the students saying?*

The students were very vocal when it came to discussing what they liked and didn’t like concerning the responses they receive on their papers. Most of what they commented on supports existing research. For instance, overwhelmingly, in each of the three ways data were collected (individual interviews, focus group interview, and written questionnaires), students reiterated the point that they want comments that are thorough and well explained. During the focus group interview several students noted their

displeasure with comments that don’t explain enough. One student, Bill, said

a lot of times you know, I’ll get papers back and it will just be something vague and it will just be like “fix this” or something. . . I would rather it just be, umm, really explained out, kind of telling me what I did wrong instead of just saying fix it. . . that would help a lot.

Another student, Alice, expands on Bill’s point when she explains that often students don’t know what is wrong with their writing. They don’t know where the mistake is. She says,

A lot of times we don’t know what’s the matter with our sentences, like if we write and we think it is okay, so it helps if he says “well, this structure is wrong and this is wrong” because a lot of times we don’t

know. We don't realize it, so if he explains it. . .

Each of these students is calling for more specificity in the comments they receive. In both cases the students understand what the comments mean, but the problem is that they are unable to revise because the comments themselves are not giving enough information to help for future writing.

Students in the individual interviews felt that some of the comments needed to be explained better as well. When asked about comments that aren't that helpful for them as writers, several students responded. Alex noted that "I think when he writes 'awkward opening' that you know it's wrong, umm, you just don't necessarily know what is wrong. . . yeah, like where it is awkward." Martin, when responding to the same question as Alex, displays some of this frustration. He says,

maybe like the "awkward phrases," it doesn't really help, it doesn't say how to fix it . . . I mainly just eliminate the sentence and use something else, you know, cause you know if you try to fix it it is still awkward.

Sometimes even comments that are perceived as positive need to be explained more. While filling out the questionnaires for the numbered comments on their papers, some students had difficulty seeing how to improve on already effective writing. For instance, a comment on Gerard's paper read "Yes!" He wrote on the questionnaire that the response means that "I explained something well." On the second part of the questionnaire, where he was asked if the response will be helpful for future drafts, he replied, "not really, it doesn't tell me why." Obviously, this comment is meant to be a boost for the writer, but since it is not specific enough to detail what was good, then the writer is left to wonder what he should learn from this response.

Comments with words are not the only type that students feel need some more explanation. Symbols cause some confusion as well. During the focus group interview, students discussed

some problems they encountered with symbol comments. Mary commented that the teacher

will just cross things out. Like he'll put a slash through a word or something, and that doesn't really help. A lot of times we're like "Why did you cross that out?" It doesn't explain it, and it really helps when you know (what the mark means) cause then you know, "okay, he crossed that word out, don't use that in that way."

Teachers need to avoid making assumptions when using symbols. First, many teachers assume that students know what each of the symbols means all of the time. In many cases, students do understand the meaning of certain symbols, but there are instances when arrows, underlines, circles, parentheses, and slashes do not convey to students the teacher's intended meaning. Plus, symbols sometimes have different meanings depending on the way they are used. For instance, on some occasions teachers may underline a word or phrase to call attention to any of a variety of errors made in the phrase or sentence, but at other times teachers may underline a group of words for one purpose, such as to show a book or text title. In these instances, the purpose of the symbol has been changed.

As noted earlier, research suggests that praise helps students improve as writers. During the focus group interviews students talked about several different ways that praise comments are important for them. Alice noted how praise comments can make all the hard work feel more worthwhile. She said the praise comments are a

confidence boost, I mean I know it helps a lot to see that we did something good on a paper, and if it's something that we worked hard on then it makes you feel better about what we did. It's not like a waste of time.

Other students see praise comments strictly as a reward for hard work. Phil said, "I think it is just a reward. You know, umm, you've worked really hard on this and you deserve this excellent comment. You deserve that kind of comment." Still other students see praise as

having a more direct influence on their writing. Bill believes that

the positive comments also help you know. . . I mean if I did good on one (paper) and if it's going to be the same type of thing. A lot of times I model how I did it. And it just really helps if he puts like positive comments on here.

Essentially, Bill sees the important role that positive comments can play in helping him to model the things he does well on his papers. The praise comments allow students to see what they are doing well and enable them to reproduce successful parts of papers in future drafts and essays.

The individual interviews also revealed some information about students' attitude toward the positive comments. When asked what he thought his teacher could do to help make him a better writer, Martin responded that he wants to see "more comments, umm, maybe say more about what he likes about the papers so I know like, I should keep it." Martin believes anytime he sees a positive comment it is a cue to keep that portion of the writing in future drafts. Earlier in his interview, Martin wanted to see more comments altogether on his papers—he had a "more is better" attitude.

Amanda connected her improvement as a writer with receiving more positive comments as the school year progressed. When asked what her teacher had done to help her improve as a writer she spoke mainly to the kinds of comments he gave on her drafts. She said,

Umm, I would say started off the beginning of the year with a lot of criticism (of her writing), with my content and what I was saying. My grammar was pretty good. And then, umm, as it went throughout the year it started being you know "this is good," "I like this," "keep this," and that just sort of helped boost me up.

Clearly, for Amanda, her development has been traced during the school year according to the kind of comments she received, or at least that she remembers seeing. Early in the

school year, she remembered more critical comments, but as the year progressed and she became more accustomed to the teacher's response style she began to see more praise in her writing. As she says, it served as a way to "boost" her up.

Several students equated receiving positive feedback with improvement, regardless if the feedback contained enough explanation or if they felt it would help with revision. Kim, who filled out a questionnaire, received the comment "good" next to a bracketed area of her paper. On the questionnaire, she responded that it was helpful "because it gives me positive feedback" but it wasn't helpful "for correctional purposes." Clearly, Kim believes that just receiving a positive comment is helpful for her writing, although this help will not come from revision or redrafting. Alice, agrees with Kim when it comes to receiving praise, but does believe that the positive comments can help improve her writing. Her teacher wrote the comment "OK—good summary so far, show effect of persuasion now. . . ." Alice understands the comment's meaning and when she writes about if it will be helpful her response echoes those made by Bill and Amanda earlier. She writes, "This helps because it gives us confidence and lets us know what to do again." Alice equates the praise comments as a means of boosting her self-esteem, and she sees them also as a guide for her to determine what parts of her writing to model for future drafts.

### Implications for Teaching

This research gives us a great deal of insight into what our students want when we respond to their writing. It tells us what kinds of things we should be doing when we mark their essays—the kinds of things that are helpful as well as frustrating for them.

First, we must be as specific and detailed as possible when we respond to our students' writing. Because of the limited amount of space on their papers, we may have to try to focus only on certain kinds of comments, depending on the draft. For instance, on early drafts, we should *only* comment on content errors or problems and avoid marking anything



to do with form or structure. Then, as successive drafts follow, we can begin looking more closely at the microstructural changes needed in the text. In any case, when we do comment we have to be specific not only in terms of the error or problem in the writing, but also, and probably more importantly, on how our students can fix it.

Second, students like to see praise in their comments. Not excessive praise, but praise that is earned. Students do use the positive comments we give them for more than just a nice pat on the back. They use them to model future writing. By praising what students write, we can do more than just make them feel good—we can help them appreciate writing and enjoy it.

Third, for students to get the most out of our comments, they need to become multiple draft writers. It is imperative that they realize writing is never perfect after just one draft. If we are not giving them the opportunity to redraft and revise their writing then they probably will not use the comments we give them anyway. To remedy this, we could spend a class period going over old papers we've graded so that students can get an idea about what to expect when they see our responses on their essays. If they don't know what our comments mean, then they won't be able to use the comments to redraft an essay anyway.

Fourth, we need to learn how we respond to our students' writing. Before we can go over with our students how we respond to their writing, we have to know and understand our own response style. We may need to go over past papers to see how we look at students' writing. For example, do we tend to comment more on content or form? Do the papers we mark look like they are covered in blood or are they barely touched? Are our comments specific enough—do we explain why we liked or didn't like a part of a paper? Do we give the students directions on how to correct mistakes? As we mark papers in the future, we also need to pay attention to what we are saying to our students through the comments we write. It is very easy to get complacent when responding to our

writers because we do it so often.

One aspect of understanding our response style, then, is being sure that our students understand how we use symbols. We need to be sure that our students understand the symbols we use. It may help to go over them with the class early in the school year, along with examples of how we use each symbol so students will have a better understanding of how we use them. This is important for two reasons. On one hand, it will let the class become familiar with how we use symbols in our responses, and on the other, it will enable us to look at our own commenting style to see exactly how we use them.

A final implication can be that we begin using the questionnaires similar to the ones that I did for this study. Early in the semester use them to determine how well students understand the comments on their papers and if they feel the responses are helpful for future writing. Obviously, to do this we would have to create an honest atmosphere in our class, but if the students know they will be getting better, more informed responses on their writing they will want to take part. Another option is to allow brief conferences with students specifically for any questions about the written comments on their papers. Both methods will not take much time in class and they will be a valuable asset to our own commenting style.

### **Conclusion**

Most of our students really do want to improve as writers. Through the interviews and questionnaires I learned how much they pay attention to the comments on their essays. I also learned that much of the existing research is correct about response to student writing—they want explanation, praise, and specificity. It seems obvious that as commentators we need to give them what they want. What else can we do? Make sure that we understand how we respond to our writers—talk to the students often, make sure that they feel free to ask questions about our comments—and give them time to do so whenever we can. We need to remember that every comment we write on their papers should have a purpose and a

distinct goal. The students should be able to understand the comments as well as be able to use them for future writing. Finally, we need to remember the way Tim and Angie felt in the conversation at the beginning of this article—confused and bewildered by the responses they read on their essays. We must make sure that we don't let our students feel that same way because of some vague, negative, and unfocused comments on their papers.

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